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## **After Election Victory, Erdogan Faces Difficulties on European Track**

With its overwhelming victory in the July 22 parliamentary elections, in which it obtained the support of almost half of the votes cast, the ruling Justice and Development Party (JDP) has consolidated its clear domination of Turkish politics. However, having successfully shown that it could sustain its mass support despite the concerns and hostility of its political opponents and the powerful Turkish military establishment, who are intensely suspicious of its Islamist roots and ultimate intentions, the JDP government now faces fresh challenges, not least with respect to Turkey's stalled relations with the European Union (EU).

The initiation of accession negotiations with the EU in 2006 helped to undermine accusations that the JDP was leading Turkey away from the West and was one of the major achievements of Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan in his first term in office. Not surprisingly, Erdogan declared immediately after his second electoral triumph that his new government would continue to work with determination "to achieve the goal of membership."

His statement was welcomed by Jose Manuel Barroso, the President of the European Commission which is conducting the negotiations with Turkey, as evidence of "Erdogan's commitment to the sustained movement towards the European Union." However, the EU Commissioner for Enlargement, Olli Rehn warned that it was imperative for the new Erdogan government to "re-launch the legal and economic reforms with full determination and concrete results."

The reality is that Erdogan is likely to find the task of reinvigorating the accession process more difficult than during his first term. Turkey's major domestic preoccupations during recent months, sustained opposition to Turkish membership throughout the EU and growing skepticism on the part of the Turkish public about the likelihood of EU membership, have contributed to a perceptible slowing down of the process and will not be easy to reverse.

The resistance to Turkish accession in the EU is being spearheaded by French President Nicolas Sarkozy who reiterated on September 20 his view that Turkey "did not belong in Europe" and that it should be offered "partnership not integration." German Chancellor Angela Merkel, who has been somewhat more circumspect than Sarkozy because of the sensitivities of her coalition partners, has also called for a privileged partnership instead of membership. Significantly, Sarkozy recently prevented the start of negotiations with Turkey on economic and monetary policy and seems likely to launch a challenge to the Turkish accession process at the EU summit in December. Although the EU Commission remains

committed to completing the negotiations and will surely resist, its efforts will be hampered by complications created by the membership in the EU of Cyprus represented by the Greek Cypriots who enjoy the open or discreet support of a number of other EU members.

It is clear that Erdogan will need all of his much-vaunted skills in personal diplomacy to reduce the negative trend, particularly after the recent retirement of Tony Blair who was strongly supportive of Turkish membership. In view of the significance of the EU factor in the Turkish domestic political equation, it is easy to understand the desire of Erdogan, the newly-elected President Abdullah Gul, who had played a major role as foreign minister in Turkey's drive to accession negotiations, and the new Foreign Minister Ali Babacan, who retains his EU Negotiator portfolio, to proceed on the path to membership. However, it is more difficult to see how they will be able clear the formidable obstacles on the way to membership.

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